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### Interview with Barbara and John Blatnik, Class of 1943

Barbara Blatnik

John Blatnik

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# INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA AND JOHN BLATNIK, CLASS OF 1943

**Madonna Curtis** 00:00

... Madonna Curtis, and I'm a member of the Student Alumni Council and I'm talking with Barbara Orr Blatnik and Mr. John Blatnik and they are the Class of 1943 at ISU at Homecoming activities on October 29, 1983. During this bit of oral history we'll be reminiscing about the way it was in 1943. We hope that those listening—those who listen to this tape, excuse me—will enjoy hearing from the persons who have volunteered to record this bit of ISU history and will find it interesting and informative. First, Mr. and Mrs. Blatnik, as you think back, however many...

**John Blatnik** 00:43

40 years.

**Madonna Curtis** 00:43

...40 years, what are some of the things that are foremost in your memory of what life was like back then at ISU—ISNU, I guess?

**John Blatnik** 00:52

That's what it was then. There was no smoking on the campus, the fire regulations prohibited. There was no drinking. In fact, they, you were expelled from the institution if you were caught drinking. It was a small school and a teacher's college at the time that conferred a bachelor's degree and that was the extent of the higher education that was conferred by this university.

**Madonna Curtis** 01:20

They were—

**Barbara Blatnik** 01:21

Most everyone did teaching that left the school. And they did their student teaching only in the schools in the area like in the University High School and the Illinois Soldiers'-Sailors' Children's School.

**John Blatnik** 01:34

Lexington, Chenoa, some of the surrounding communities...

**Barbara Blatnik** 01:37

And we taught for a whole year, one class, each day for a whole year.

**Madonna Curtis** 01:43

Sounds interesting.

**Barbara Blatnik** 01:44

Quite different than what is now.

**Madonna Curtis** 01:47

What do you remember about the president—if may I ask his name, who was the president at that time?

**Barbara Blatnik** 01:52

It was President Fairchild. He was a large man.

**John Blatnik** 01:58

He was imposing.

**Barbara Blatnik** 01:59

Yes, he was interested in in the education of the students and—

**John Blatnik** 02:06

He was an able administrator, was a good administrator.

**Barbara Blatnik** 02:10

He was here for quite a few years. I don't remember how many now though.

**Madonna Curtis** 02:14

Did he have a lot of contact with the students? Was he that type of a man?

**John Blatnik** 02:19

Yes, he was. He was, Barbara, Barbara's father taught at the university and he was a family friend as well.

**Madonna Curtis** 02:29

Who were some of the professors and university administrative officials that you remember for special reasons?

**Barbara Blatnik** 02:36

I remember Dean Barton and Dean Keaton, who did promote a lot of the women's activities I think at the school. Always willing to listen to us and talk about our problems. Professor Holmes was very well liked and later went on to be president of the Dekalb University—

**John Blatnik** 02:59

Northern Illinois.

**Barbara Blatnik** 03:00

—at Northern. Professor Hibler was in Psychology. He formed a psychological consultant group in Chicago and he was very successful when he was up there.

**John Blatnik 03:12**

A. R. Williams was head of the business department where I majored and he recommended a number of hopefully the better students for commissions in the Navy. And at that time of course we were in the Second World War and I was fortunate enough to be recommended by Professor Williams for a commission in the Navy.

**Madonna Curtis 03:33**

What was it like during the Second World War at school here? Were there very many—I mean, were there are a lot of people going here or not many?

**John Blatnik 03:40**

We dwindled a great deal. Of course, the men were pulled out, they—many of the men in their sophomore and junior years had enrolled in the V-12 Program and were called to the front lines instead of getting officer training, because we needed men in the frontlines. I was fortunate enough to graduate with a commission, and went into the Navy after that, but it was difficult to finish school here if you were a male student.

**Madonna Curtis 04:06**

Okay, students today talk about how difficult it is to complete their education. How do you compare it? How do you compare how it was during your years here to the way it seems today?

**John Blatnik 04:18**

Well, that was one of the one of the things was the war, the major thing was the war and it was difficult for a male student to finish. For a female, it was not as difficult. Although we were recovering from the depressions of the late 20s, in the early 30s we were still at the tail end. Franklin Roosevelt was president at that time and of course we were in a stage of recovery, but it was difficult. Most of us were middle class working-type people, the children of those kinds of people, who came to work here.

**Madonna Curtis 04:49**

So did very many people. I mean, a lot of people attend college today because of grants and funds and things like that. Were there...?

**John Blatnik 04:58**

The grants and funds were limited, although there was a program called the National Youth Act, NYA. I worked under that for four years, receiving 30 cents an hour for my pay.

**Barbara Blatnik 05:11**

My mother had my, you know, we lived here and so my mother had student help clean house, you know, you could hardly afford not to at that price, 30 cents.

**John Blatnik 05:20**

30 cents an hour.

**Madonna Curtis 05:22**

What were, what kinds of extracurricular activities were important to you and other students here?

**Barbara Blatnik** 05:30

Oh, there were so many interesting things. We had lecture series that—had such good name bands and good pianists and Frost was here, the poet.

**John Blatnik** 05:42

Robert Frost was here.

**Barbara Blatnik** 05:43

Alec Templeton, the pianist. The lecture series we thought were very, very good.

**John Blatnik** 05:49

Course this was the era of the big bands also. And that was very important to students at that time and we had, I remember, Bob Crosby was here.

**Barbara Blatnik** 05:57

Ted Weems.

**John Blatnik** 05:58

Ted Weems and many of the big bands were, performed, on campus.

**Barbara Blatnik** 06:02

The Gamma Phi Circus was a biggie. I don't even know what—do you have a Gamma Phi? Do you?

**Madonna Curtis** 06:07

We still do. Yes.

**Barbara Blatnik** 06:08

The Gamma Phi Circus every year was a very big event. We had a lot of debating societies.

**John Blatnik** 06:16

Athletics were important. We had won four consecutive football championships and five consecutive basketball championships in our conference, which at that time consisted of Northern Illinois, Southern Illinois, Eastern, Western and Illinois State. And that was the conference at the time.

**Barbara Blatnik** 06:32

Also Wesleyan and Normal were great rivals. And we'd have a bonfire the night before the game and Wesleyan tried to come and burn the bonfire down.

**John Blatnik** 06:45

We'd try to set theirs—

**Barbara Blatnik** 06:46

And try to set theirs on fire. We had snake dance and it wasn't, you know, it was such a smaller school that everything was, I don't know, a lot of fun.

**John Blatnik** 06:55

We were close.

**Madonna Curtis** 06:56

Okay, what were the prices then for hamburgers, movies, gasoline, tuition, whatever else, et cetera?

**John Blatnik** 07:05

Tuition was about \$27.50. And if you had a scholarship, it was only half of that first. That was a semester's tuition.

**Barbara Blatnik** 07:11

I think the books included in that tuition.

**John Blatnik** 07:13

And books were included.

**Barbara Blatnik** 07:14

You didn't have to pay like \$20 and \$30 for books—

**John Blatnik** 07:18

But you had to teach school. If you went to school here, you had to sign a statement that you would teach after graduating. Hamburgers I think Steak 'n Shake's hamburgers were about a quarter, movies were similarly priced. Gasoline was 17 to 20 cents a gallon. You could get about five gallons of gas for a dollar which tells you something about the price of gasoline.

**Barbara Blatnik** 07:38

You'd get a dollar's worth of gas usually and have a big evening on that.

**Madonna Curtis** 07:44

Well, where were the local hangouts here?

**John Blatnik** 07:47

Well, the Co-op.

**Barbara Blatnik** 07:48

The Co-op was at the corner of the school.

**John Blatnik** 07:51

And Fell Gate.

**Barbara Blatnik** 07:51

And Fell Gate, I don't know whether you still have that gate over there. It's a gate at the end of the Main Street coming from Normal and they had a chain across it at nighttime.

**John Blatnik** 08:02

Was there a Green Lantern?

**Barbara Blatnik** 08:04

There was a Green—Green Goblin in town.

**John Blatnik** 08:07

Green Goblin.

**Barbara Blatnik** 08:07

Goblin was in town, but the Co-op really was a hang out. Also, I think a lot of students went to Lucca's Grill in Bloomington.

**John Blatnik** 08:15

Right.

**Barbara Blatnik** 08:16

Spaghetti place, but we really didn't have, you know, places like you do.

**John Blatnik** 08:22

No Student Union.

**Madonna Curtis** 08:25

Through the decades there are like fads like streaking and things like that. Did you guys have any sort of crazy fads like that?

**John Blatnik** 08:34

No, not there were no extreme activities of that kind. I think one of the activities was the trying to light the bonfire of Wesleyan and they tried to light ours that that was something and there was some damage done to the campuses like we would paint big N, a big red N, on the gate of Illinois Wesleyan and they would come and try to do the same thing here.

**Madonna Curtis** 08:59

Okay.

**Barbara Blatnik** 09:00

I don't think there were any fads or such really.

**Madonna Curtis** 09:03

What were the typical modes of dress?

**Barbara Blatnik** 09:05

Well in school, you never saw slacks when we were in college. Girls usually wore skirts, twinset sweaters, blouses with, you know, collars, bobby socks, saddle shoes. Always wear a hat and gloves

when we'd go to church. Girls had—in the yearbook, I noticed, little sausage curls we used to wear so much on our hair. It looks like we had rolled them up around and put a bobby pin through them.

**John Blatnik** 09:37

Men—men wore slacks and shirts. We weren't, close haircuts, crew cuts a lot, sport coats to church or suits.

**Madonna Curtis** 09:49

What was the most important national event that happened in those years?

**Barbara Blatnik** 09:53

It was the beginning of the war.

**John Blatnik** 09:55

Yes, I think it was the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the beginning of the Second World War, which occurred in our stay here.

**Madonna Curtis** 10:02

Okay, you mentioned before the big bands and stuff as the forms of entertainment. Were there anything—was there anything else that was...?

**John Blatnik** 10:10

I think that would be repetitive. I think the dances, the lecture series, the plays. We had excellent student plays and the football games and other athletic events.

**Madonna Curtis** 10:21

What do you remember about the towns of Bloomington and Normal?

**Barbara Blatnik** 10:24

Well, of course they were small. I think Bloomington was about 30—37,000 maybe and Normal was around 7000. I—Bloomington was kind of a farming community. State Farm was the biggest and about the only place that was for people to get a job wasn't it almost?

**John Blatnik** 10:48

Yes. Also Normal was a dry community at the time, you—no alcoholic beverages were sold in Normal at the time. Bloomington did have alcoholic beverages but Normal did not.

**Barbara Blatnik** 11:00

We had a streetcar. I think it was that our last year—our first year in college maybe, but there used to be a streetcar that ran from what they called the station store and that was at the Fell Gate that ran from there to Bloomington and that was our mode of transportation. And then the buses came in after that. But we did have streetcars in town for quite a long time.

**Madonna Curtis** 11:21

Okay, what did you like most about ISNU?



**John Blatnik** 11:25

It was small, it was personal. Least of all, I didn't like anything. I liked going to school here. I enjoyed it very much. It was a very warm period in my life. I met my wife here. We were married after grad—we both graduated and for me, it has many memories.

**Barbara Blatnik** 11:45

I like the smallness of it. You get a lot more personal attention sometimes.

**Madonna Curtis** 11:52

What would the campus boundaries then?

**Barbara Blatnik** 11:54

Alright, University was the west boundary, Mulberry was the north and North School Street was it the east in Beaufort on the south. And there were only a very—you want me to tell you what the buildings were, when we were there?

**Madonna Curtis** 12:12

Sure, go ahead.

**Barbara Blatnik** 12:12

First of all, there was the Tom Smith School and then of course there was a walkway connected to the Old Main and then a walk—covered walkway—to the Industrial Arts Building.

**John Blatnik** 12:22

Industrial Arts.

**Barbara Blatnik** 12:23

Which had what we called Capen Auditorium at the time. And everything was held in that building, all of our lecture series. And we had assembly once a week that we had to attend. And we sat there. Then there was Cook Hall which is Old Castle. Only one women's dorm which has Fell Hall, and—was the...?

**John Blatnik** 12:45

The gym.

**Barbara Blatnik** 12:45

The gym.

**John Blatnik** 12:47

Also the Science Building.

**Barbara Blatnik** 12:49

Felmley Science Building and the old library.

**John Blatnik** 12:51

The old library, the new library was built—Milner Library was built after we started school.

**Barbara Blatnik** 12:57

'39.

**John Blatnik** 12:58

About '40.

**Barbara Blatnik** 13:01

We used to bowl in the Old Castle, they had two lanes of bowling in there, we used to bowl in there I can remember, in the gym. And then the radio station was upstairs, wasn't it?

**John Blatnik** 13:10

Yes.

**Barbara Blatnik** 13:10

On the very top floor.

**Madonna Curtis** 13:14

They didn't ask this, but you mentioned there was one women's dorm. What was dorm life like back like back then? I know now, they have co-ed dorms and things like that.

**John Blatnik** 13:24

There was no co-ed.

**Barbara Blatnik** 13:25

One men's dorm, one women's dorm. Smith Hall—

**John Blatnik** 13:27

Smith Hall was the men's dorm. It was on the west side of University. Fell Hall was on the campus and it was all separated. I remember going to dances at Fell Hall. There were a lot of other activities that they sponsored.

**Barbara Blatnik** 13:43

But people lived in private homes a lot of the times.

**John Blatnik** 13:48

Yes. Probably 75-80% of the students, maybe even more, lived in private homes. I lived at 402 West Mulberry in my junior and senior year. It's now part of the campus, it's torn down.

**Madonna Curtis** 14:01

Did you have curfews? I mean a time when there was like bed checks and things like that?

**John Blatnik** 14:06

Women did. Barbara, Barbara wouldn't know that because she lived in her own home. But women did have curfews. You remember Jane was keeper the keys at Fell Hall and they would lock the doors?

**Barbara Blatnik** 14:17

We also had some places where people could cook, you know...

**John Blatnik** 14:26

Lighthouse-keeping privileges.

**Madonna Curtis** 14:28

Did you have—I know we have the Student Union and the library to study, you know. Did you have any other place besides?

**Barbara Blatnik** 14:34

Just the library.

**John Blatnik** 14:36

It was the most central point.

**Barbara Blatnik** 14:39

I majored in Home Economics and we did have a home management house, I forgot about that. And we had to live there a certain number of weeks and take care of the house. You know, we did the cooking and the cleaning and anything that needed to be done. It was part of our training as a home economics major.

**Madonna Curtis** 14:56

That wasn't Rambo House, was it? What was Homecoming like back then?

**John Blatnik** 15:05

Well, we had a parade just like we did today. And the football game was the big activity and the Homecoming dance. And usually one of the big bands would perform at the dance.

**Barbara Blatnik** 15:15

But I don't remember having any class reunions or classes honored, were they?

**John Blatnik** 15:21

Well, we weren't, we weren't alumni then, I'm not sure we'd—

**Barbara Blatnik** 15:24

Maybe we wouldn't have remembered.

**Madonna Curtis** 15:26

Were you allowed to go to the dance? I mean, did they have a special dance for the students? Or was it just for alumni? The Homecoming dance?

**John Blatnik** 15:33

I can't tell you that. I don't know.

**Barbara Blatnik** 15:35

I think it was just the one dance and everybody who wanted to went to it.

**Madonna Curtis** 15:40

Okay, are there any other special memories that haven't been mentioned in the questions here?

**Barbara Blatnik** 15:48

I don't know. I did say we can drive through the campus gently, which is—oh, we had graduation outside in a place called Sherwood Forest, which was on the east, kind of southeast part of the campus at that time. And we had a graduation out there. We had plays, you know, when it was—the weather permitted. Plays were out there. It was a very interesting graduation service, I thought, the outside.

**John Blatnik** 16:17

I can't remember anything else.

**Barbara Blatnik** 16:19

Oh, I know. Remember Old Main, how the stairs were so—they were wooden. And they were so worn, like, they were this thin, and they were narrow. And so one of our rules, or, they said, you go up—if you're going up stairs, you go up north and down south. So you wouldn't have any confusion of traffic.

**John Blatnik** 16:36

There was a traffic pattern.

**Barbara Blatnik** 16:37

Also at the four corners at the Old Main was just kind of, it was kind of a hangout, I guess. It was a meeting place for everybody.

**John Blatnik** 16:44

The bulletin boards were there.

**Barbara Blatnik** 16:44

The bulletin boards were there and anything you wanted to know was posted on the bulletin boards. And that was usually a crowded corner.

**John Blatnik** 16:51

Yes.

**Barbara Blatnik** 16:52

Old Main's been torn down, I assume?

**John Blatnik** 16:54

Yes it has, we have part of one of the bricks.

**Barbara Blatnik** 16:56

Did they keep the top, the dome?

**Madonna Curtis** 16:57

We've got one of the bricks. I don't know whether they've kept the dome.

**John Blatnik** 17:01

It used to be down at Sherwood Forest.

**Madonna Curtis** 17:03

Oh, well, then I don't know where it's kept. Nobody's ever mentioned it. They have a cornerstone or something, a monument. It's out on the Quad right across from Schroeder Hall. Well, I'd like to thank you very much. This has been really interesting and informative and thank you for doing this interview.

**Barbara Blatnik** 17:24

Thank you.